

BEZBAROA

The Man and His Works

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Bezbaroa at Sambalpur : A Note

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Bezbaroa's life is marked by three important phases. The first phase was in Sivasagar, Assam where he spent days from his birth till he passed matriculation examination and left for Calcutta (now Kolkata) for studies. The second phase was passed in Kolkata where he studied, graduated and entered into the struggle of life after getting married. The third phase of life was spent in Sambalpur where he permanently settled and stayed till a few days before his death at Dibrugarh. The first phase enabled Bezbaroa to thoroughly understand the cultural milieu of Assam and to strike his roots into the physical and cultural environment of the state. The second phase broadens the mental horizon of Bezbaroa and fecundates his creativity. The third phase acquaints Bezbaroa with the stern realities of life and the world. The battle that Bezbaroa fought for establishing the separate identity of Assamese language and literature can be studied with a reference to the experience that Bezbaroa gathered in Sivasagar, Kolkata and Sambalpur. His experience helped him to see the individual distinctiveness of the three languages—Assamese, Bengali and Oriya that originated from the same source. It goes without saying that the discriminatory language policy of the British imperialists led the Oriyas, like the Assamese, to struggle against the linguistic invasion of the Bengalis. Bezbaroa's intimate understanding of the cultural milieu of the three places enabled him to deal squarely with the

challenges confronted by the Assamese language.

Bezbaroa spent twenty two years (1864-1886) in Assam. In Kolkata he spent almost thirty years (1887-1917). From 1917 to a few days before his death, *i.e.*, a period of another twenty years was spent in Sambalpur.

Sambalpur is a district in the western part of Odisha. Sambalpur is the district headquarters of the Sambalpur district. Almost 60% percent of land in the district is covered by dense forest even today. A place besides Sambalpur, frequently mentioned by Bezbaroa in his diary, is Jharsuguda, a district situated to the west of Sambalpur. The presiding diety of Sambalpur is Goddess Samalei. She is a goddess of wealth and opulence. Sambalpur is named after the blessings of that goddess.¹ Sambalpur had been a princely state ruled by the Sai dynasty till the beginnings of the nineteenth century. Veer Surendra Sai, a king of the dynasty, fought against the British rule during Sepoy Mutiny. The last inheritor to the throne, Narayan Singh, did not have a son and on that pretext the British annexed the kingdom to the Bengal Presidency in 1849 according to the Doctrine of Lapse. In 1862, this kingdom, however, was merged to the Central Province. In the first half of the twentieth century, the population of Sambalpur stood at about ten thousand.² This town situated on the bank of Mahanadi, which has originated from the plateau of Chotanagpur, was the nerve centre of west Odisha. Sambalpur at that time was “a tiny town economically rotten and politically sensitive, educationally backward and industrially moth-eaten”.³ The only ‘dignified centre of learning’ in the area was the Sambalpur Zilla School established in 1858.⁴

After almost a decade of successful joint timber business with Bholanath Barua at Kolkata, suddenly ‘*kali*’ entered into the relationship and they fall apart and Bezbaroa ventured on an independent business. The venture did not meet with success and Bezbaroa decided to take up a job. Accordingly, he joined a service



Bezbaroa's House at Sambalpur

under the Bird Company in August 22, 1916 for a salary of rupees one hundred and fifty per month. He served at the Kolkata office of the company for a year and he extensively travelled Bengal, Bihar and Odisha. In 1917 the Bird Company took on lease the jungle of Bihar and Odisha for a period of five years and the company sent Bezbaroa to Sambalpur by raising his salary to two hundred rupees. The company provided Bezbaroa with servants and attendants. Bezbaroa went to Sambalpur from Kolkata in September that year. He proved his excellence in his service to the company at Sambalpur and the company also raised his salary and other amenities. Bezbaroa worked for the Bird Company at a stretch for eleven years. Towards the end of 1927, the company asked him to work in the forests of Assam. During that period he had to work in places like Shillong, Nongpo, Lilac, Bornihat, Nongram, Umling, Kukurmara etc. The period of time working in the forests of Assam was the toughest period of time in his life. In 1928 Bezbaroa gave up the job of the company and ventured on an independent business for the second time. But this time also he could not attain success. In a letter written

on 13.01.1931 to his daughter Aruna Mukerjea, the strain of sadness was unmistakable:

“My bussiness this time has become the worst ever. The stacks of logs at the depot are rising but there is no sale. Investment has drained out my purse. I have been thinking of going to you to sleep away the rest of my days. Give me a meal of rice and I shall give up the rest. Keep a small bedstead in the ground floor—a stringed bedstead will do.”⁵

Bezbaroa went to Sambalpur in his fifties and through many a strife in his life he became a tough man of determination. He spent most of the time in earning the basic necessities of life. He could not concentrate on creative work. The short stories like ‘Shan’, ‘Marjari’, ‘Maganiyar Burha’, ‘Dasmantar’, ‘Barichowa’, ‘Bhoira’ etc. written during his stay at Sambalpur bears evidence more of naked realism than creative imagination. This has been mentioned by Dr. Maheswar Neog in his preface to *Bezbaroar Dinlekha*.⁶ In his autobiography *Mor Jiwani Sowaran*, written at Sambalpur, the readers meet a Bezbaroa ripened in experience by the struggles and strifes of life and not the visionary and talkative Bezbaroa of the early life. He is like one who has attained a calm of mind after spending all passions.

Bezbaroa permanently settled at Sambalpur. In 1924 he built on the bank of the Mahanadi a residence of his choice. He was keenly interested in the social life of Sambalpur. His diary records an outline of life lived at Sambalpur from 1917 till a few days before his death. The essay titled ‘Mor Mrigaya’ tells us how Sambalpur made him a hunter out of a young boy who could not endure the sight of a climbing fish or a muddy-water fish beaten into death before cleaning. Like Sivasagar and Kolkata, Sambalpur was also a colourful chapter in Bezbaroa’s life. A few days before his death on 26.03.1938 at Dibrugarh, i.e., on 12.03.1938, in a letter written to his daughter Aruna, he stated, “I shall leave this place on 18th and without halting

anywhere, I shall go straight to Sambalpur.”⁷ This is clear evidence of his love for Sambalpur. Bezbaroa’s life and literary activities at Sambalpur have made Sambalpur a familiar place for the Assamese people. It can be safely concluded that Lakshminath Bezbaroa, the charioteer of Assamese literature, will be for ever remembered by the Assamese people and Sambalpur will remain emotionally attached to the people of Assam.

References:

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